

He played
with Thomas.

—
Roswell M.

Field

(1929)



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HE PLAYED WITH THOMAS



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HE PLAYED WITH THOMAS

*A Story
of
God's Own Country*

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He Played With Thomas

THE BOYS had gathered in John Kingman's grocery. It wasn't much of a grocery, but, for that matter, Elk Grove wasn't much of a town; so accounts balanced. Why Elk Grove was called Elk Grove is a question as hard to answer as the fair Juliet's impatient query, "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" Some people ask foolish questions with no expectation of a satisfactory answer. The few houses that composed the town were dumped out on a wide and cheerless prairie in Western Kansas, and, while it is possible that in bygone ages an elk may have passed along on its way to a more congenial stamping-ground, there never was any scientific reason for supposing that a grove could by any chance have been a feature of the place. One argument was that the town originally was Elk Grave, so

John Kingman, 101787

called from the discovery of bones supposed to belong to the cervine family, and that when the Santa Fé road put up a little station and made out a new time-table a typographical error changed the Grave to Grove, an indignity which the haughty and autocratic magnates refused to rectify. This explanation may be taken for what it is worth, but it is cited merely to show how the railroad power in Kansas has ridden arbitrarily over the intentions and desires of the people.

Evidently the road favored not only offering a slight, but rubbing it in as well, for it persisted in treating Elk Grove as a whistling-station, and trains seldom stopped save to put off a tramp or repair the engine. Indeed, it began to be whispered about that the conductors saved up their tramps for Elk Grove, and it was noticed that when the engineer pulled out he wore a grin hideous in its malignant cunning. Several indignation meetings were called, and it was resolved to carry the matter to Topeka, but the subsequent reflection

that the railroad owned the legislature and the entire machinery from Governor down to janitor put an end to that scheme. So the boys soothed their feelings by rallying at John Kingman's grocery store and drinking success to prohibition and confusion to tramps and railroad conductors.

On the night sacred to the incidents of this tale the rally was a little larger than usual. The Hanks boys were there, and the Blilers; Bill Cook and his cousin Tom; Sam Chesney, the toughest man in the district; Joe Ardway, with a record of three men; Captain Matthews, the marshal, and two cowboys visiting the town and always agreeable to anything that promised exercise and relaxation. John Kingman was in good spirits, and as he shoved the dried apples behind the counter and put a few more boards on the cracker boxes, he intimated that liquor was accessible.

As might have been expected from so sprightly and jovial an assemblage, the conversation turned humorously on the attitude of the railroad toward Elk

Grove, and the still more perplexing attitude of the town toward tramps. Joe Ardway contended that Captain Matthews, as town marshal, was derelict in his duty in failing to take extreme measures against the output of through travel. The marshal replied that his duties were circumscribed; that he regreted to say that tramps as a rule had been perfectly peaceable, and that he would not be justified under the statutes and his oath of office in shooting a man whose only offense was breathing.

To this position one of the visiting cow gentlemen, in a perfectly calm and dignified tone, took exception. He pointed out that a tramp without home and money was a necessarily wretched being, whom it would be kindness to put out of his misery. He believed it was the duty of mankind to alleviate pain and suffering, and he knew of no medicine so quick and sure in action as a bullet administered with a steady hand and an unerring eye.

This opinion excited a general dis-

cussion. It was cordially endorsed by Sam Chesney and the Blilers, and gently criticised by Bill Cook. Mr. Cook believed that it was the sense of the community to breathe a spirit of toleration. He admitted that tramps were no good, and deserved a little touching up, but he couldn't countenance anything worse for a first offence than hanging — not hanging to death, of course, but just long enough to give a good choking and a scare. And he quoted from the beatitudes: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy." For Mr. Cook was quite a scholar, in his way, and, rumor said, had taught in Sunday-school back east.

The calm judicial manner and scriptural quotation were not without a quieting effect upon the audience, already slightly inflamed by the potency of Mr. Kingman's hospitality, and the convention had settled down to the discussion of the minor penalties of mob law, when three sharp whistles signaled the approach of the night express from the west. Bill Cook shrugged his

shoulders, the Bliler boys laughed, and Joe Ardway looked significantly at Captain Matthews and grunted:

“Tramps!”

Mr. Kingman was equal to the emergency. He lighted the lantern and passed it to the marshal, who took it and walked out without a word, the boys falling in in single file. When fifty yards from the station, they saw the conductor on the platform raise his foot, give a careless, easy swing, and a dark object shot from the train and rolled over into the ditch. Somebody called out, “Go ahead”; a sardonic laugh floated back from the cab; the bell rang, and the express puffed off to the east.

The night was dark, and the marshal flashed his lantern vigorously before the dark object was seen wiggling up the sides of the ditch like a copperhead in a cactus. “I’ve got him,” said Sam Chesney. “Come up to the hotel, young feller, and join the festivities you’ve interrupted.”

So back to the grocery the party

went, the shivering tramp surrounded by his captors, who regaled him with fragmentary discourse touching the last public execution in Elk Grove. And when Kingman had lighted another lamp in honor of the occasion, they shoved him into the middle of the room for general examination.

He was not a young fellow after all, but a middle-aged man, the picture of woe and degradation. He was emaciated, ragged and dirty beyond the usual limitations of the tramp. His clothes were marvelous in their infinite variety. Hunger and disease showed in his sunken eyes and cheeks, and he tenderly passed a trembling hand over the contusions produced by his fall and the conductor's boot.

"Well," said Joe Ardway, "what do you want?"

"It occurs to me, gentlemen," replied the tramp, "that it is not what I want, but what you want. However, since you are so kind as to put it that way, I will say, without delay, that I would like a drink."

The boys were immediately impressed with the reasonableness and good sense of this request, and Kingman poured out a grown man's supply, which the tramp seized eagerly and gulped down to the last drop.

"Now," said Mr. Ardway, winking at the boys, "p'r'aps you don't know that there is a law ag'in tramps in this town?"

The tramp smiled in a sickly manner that might have been a confession either of ignorance or indifference.

"Well, there is, a very good and just law. It passed this house ten minutes before your train got in, and it means death."

Still the tramp sat silent and unmoved. After a moment he spoke, with a sort of weary despondency of tone:

"I don't suppose it would make any difference to me or anybody else how soon death comes to me, and a few days more or less don't matter."

Mr. Ardway gave the boys another wink. "I'm glad to see you resigned, and we'll make it as easy for you as we

can. There ain't no particular hurry, and if there's anythin' you'd like to say or do special before we begin, you can go ahead."

The tramp looked listlessly about him. On the shelf behind the counter, just over George Bliler's head, was a violin. It belonged to Kingman's oldest boy, who played for his father's customers whenever they were musically inclined. A flash of joy came into the tramp's eyes, and he said, in a tone that was almost tender:

"I see a violin up there. It has been many months since I have held one in my hands. I think I should like to play again tonight."

"Oh, come off," said Mr. Chesney; "this ain't no musical conservatory."

"That's all right, Sam," interposed Mr. Ardway; "if he wants to give a concert it ain't gentlemanly to object." Then to the tramp: "We didn't know when we saw you gettin' off at our humble depot that you was a concert artist."

"I played the violin for many years,"

said the tramp, "when I was with Thomas."

"Oh, see here, what are you givin' us? There wasn't no violin-playing in the army, and you don't look as if you'd ever had spunk enough to fight a rabbit."

The boys looked at Tom Hanks approvingly. Tom had a war record, and knew every division and brigade commander by name and history.

"I didn't say I ever was in the army," said the tramp, humbly. "I meant that I played with Thomas, the orchestra leader, you know."

"Oh, that's different," grunted Mr. Hanks, and he looked at the boys as if to intimate that he was on personal terms with the Thomases of all creation.

"I was a happy fellow in those days, gentlemen," went on the tramp, almost caressing the fiddle that George handed to him. "It was back in New York, and I was young and ambitious. Perhaps you don't care for music. At all

events, you've probably never played in a great orchestra with your blood tingling and the crash of harmony all around you."

"I'm sorry to say," put in Mr. Ardway, dryly, "as how most of us gave up our music when we were young, although we are reckoned right lively connysuers."

"It was glorious," said the tramp, without seeming to notice the apology. "Here stood Thomas, waving the baton, and here I sat at his left, in the first row of violins. Down below me, and stretching back to the right and to the left, is the brilliant audience, with eyes fastened on us, and not a rustle to disturb the music. We open with the overture to *Rienzi*."

The tramp had been tuning the instrument as he talked. Then he squared back and fiddled away with such rapidity and vehemence that the boys looked on astonished.

"Your tekneek seems to be allright," said Bill Cook, who had acquired a

musical education at concerts in Dodge City, "but I ain't much stuck on that tune."

The criticism appeared to bring the tramp back to a realization of his position. He laid down the fiddle and sighed. "I don't know why it is, but when the fit strikes me I feel like playing a whole programme. But what's the use? If you don't have the brass and the reeds and the great volume behind you, how can you convey the grand inspiration of Wagner?"

"Sure," said Mr. Cook, who felt that his reputation demanded that he should say something.

"This may be very choice," broke in Mr. Chesney, impatiently, "but if you had such a soft snap why didn't you freeze to it?"

"That's just it," bitterly replied the tramp. "What did it? Why, whisky, of course. I don't preach any temperance sermon, but whisky cost me my place and reputation, set me adrift, brought me west, subjected me to hunger and cold and exposure, and brought

on the disease that's about finished me. I was trying to get back home when the brakeman caught me. It was a chance anybody might take. The longing to go home was too strong to resist, and I thought if I could reach Topoka I might find friends to help me. But perhaps it doesn't make any difference, for I can't last long, anyway."

If anybody had looked in Mr. Cook's face he would have seen a sort of twitching around the corners of Mr. Cook's mouth and a pitying expression in Mr. Cook's eyes. Mr. Ardway, too, had a much gentler tone when he said:

"It's the opinion of this meeting that your tunes are out of date. You ain't up to the times, and you ain't no credit to Kansas. It wouldn't be right to send you back without some signs of progress. Can't you play the Washerwoman's Dance or a heel and toe, or something with music in it?"

The tramp struck up a lively air, and the boys grinned and kept time with their feet on Kingman's barrels. Then the music came slower and

slower, and the boot accompaniments stopped. The tramp's eyes were closed and his mind had wandered again. It was a simple melody he played, but it touched the boys, and no city audience could have listened with more profound attention to the orchestra of which the tramp had been a part. Twice he played it with increasing fervor, and then he changed the theme and played, one after another, the airs that are popular in all sections of the country, and that, somehow, are always associated with home and childhood and better days. And old John Kingman listened in amazement. He could not believe that the beautiful tones he heard came from his boy's old fiddle. Still the tramp played on, until Captain Matthews, who sat near him, swore that he saw two tears come from his closed eyes and roll down his cheeks.

Sam Chesney drew a long breath. "That's the sort," said Mr. Chesney. Mr. Ardway held a hurried consultation with the Blilers and the Hanks

boys and Bill Cook. Then he said, with great gravity :

“Stranger, it’s the vote of this meeting that you’ve had a run of uncommon hard luck, and been imposed on by circumstances. If a man wants to go home and die, there ain’t no kick coming to Elk Grove. So we’ve decided to make pool and buy a ticket to Topeka, and start you off in style. Kingman’s got a store-room back here, where there ain’t nothing portable, and you can get a shake-down tonight and a square meal in the morning. You’ll be expected to turn up after breakfast and fiddle us a few of them good old tunes, and we’ll have the ladies down to hear you. Then we’ll fix you out and flag the train and start you off.”

If there was any doubt about the tears in the tramp’s eyes when Cap. Matthews watched him, there was none now. “Believe me, gentlemen,” he said, “I am not entirely unworthy of your kindness, even if I never repay you. I wasn’t always what I am now,

and what I am you can see I shall not be very long."

Mr. Chesney escorted the tramp to his lodging in the rear of the grocery, and Mr. Kingman and Mr. Ardway brought in a quilt and a pile of empty sacks, with an old army coat for a pillow. After the others had gone out, Mr. Chesney lingered.

"I say, stranger," he said; "what was that tune you played just after the jig?"

The tramp pondered a moment. His face brightened. "That was Ave Maria."

"What's the Avvy Mareea?" asked the puzzled Mr. Chesney.

"The Ave Maria," replied the tramp, "is a prayer to the Mother. I played it a hundred times when I was with Thomas."

Mr. Chesney helped old John lock up that night. Then the two men took the lantern and went around and looked in at the window. The tramp was lying on the quilts, and a peaceful look was on his thin face. Once he stirred

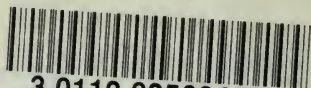
and smiled in his sleep. "He thinks he's playing the Avvy Mareea," said Mr. Chesney.

And they tiptoed away, lest their presence might alarm the Mother.



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